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ABSTRACT

First year writing students were asked which kinds of writing they enjoyed, and why. Their responses indicate a preference for "creative" writing, where "creative" is defined as "personal." The students in the research sample reacted against a form of knowing that requires them to place more emphasis on objects (human or non-human) in their world than on themselves, suggesting that subjectivist and procedural knowing work hand-in-hand for college-age students. Their responses show that, overall, they understand the reality of separate knowing, the voice of reason that doubts and questions each proposition it encounters. In addition, many students are able to use their knowledge of how to write for the intelligent but uninformed reader, yet simultaneously believe that the best writing reveals truth through self-generation of knowledge. Separate knowing is too impersonal for these students; yet their marked preference for personal writing, their distinct need to "get into" a subject and be able to understand immediately, suggests that they might readily and with much less protest gravitate toward this way of knowing if encouraged to do so. As a consequence, the passage of students to the perspective which integrates thinking and feeling, self and other, while acknowledging that knowledge is constructed and the knower is an intimate part of the known, could be a more pleasurable collaborative experience for both student and teacher. (Three pages of data on writing preferences and survey results are included.) (PRA)

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What Our Students Like to Write and Why:
Exploring the Creative and Personal

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March 21, 1991

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In all of our endeavors, we are active creators of our world–whether it be the world of the quantum physicist or the world of the poet laureate. When we see and think, we take the materials of our world and work them into a shape that we can then name, explain, and reproduce. Whether we are collecting spirochete specimens or nouns and verbs, we are creating a thing endowed with meaning.

One of the most pragmatic and lucidly written texts on composition theory and practice, *Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* by Erica Lindemann, makes a valiant case for the generative nature of all writing and the creative abilities which most all of us possess:

Lindemann writes: "To create" is not beyond the capacity of any normal human being. If creativity is somehow a special ability, it is special for us all....Our culture tends to place greater emphasis on cognitive modes of thought, on logic, reason, and literacy. However, imagination and feeling, affective modes, all represent an important way of thinking. Writers must respect both the affective and cognitive dimensions of thoughts, developing a feeling for and an intuition about their work as well as a sense of its logic. "(p. 57)

But the evolution of transformation of consciousness is a slow process, one that is often invisible to the watchful eye until long after it has taken place. Consequently, we remain burdened with a culture that sees through the glass darkly, maintaining that creative writing embodies the self and the imagination, while so-called factual writing projects objective reality. Students are left with a belief, based largely on their academic writing experiences, that creative writing is the appropriate forum from which the self can speak–other forms of writing demand that the self be hidden or obliterated altogether.

"Creative" for the young writer usually does not reflect the public and historical world of art, that world which understands the symbiotic relationship of form and feeling, technique and product. They have yet to learn one of the principal tenets of *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*: "You must learn first to observe the rules faithfully;

afterwards modify them according to your intelligence and capacity. The end of all method is to seem to have no method. (Berthoff, 268)

I believe that "creative" for these young writers is more accurately defined as the personal. No matter whether they are explaining why they like to write essays or poems, the reasons they present , while couched in the terms "creative" and "non-creative," express with enlightening regularily the world of the personal (refer to table D).

Why then don't they like the kinds of writing that we, as educators and academicians, find so valuable—well-researched essays, arguments substantiated with authoritative supports, finely crafted analytical discussions? Easy answers are indeed easy: the students are lazy, poorly prepared, unmotivated. And while in some cases these reasons might be legitimate (and in and of themselves very complex), this research suggests that such explanations are simplistic. Theories of developmental psychology present us with what I have found to be fruitful material for constructing more plausible answers. In particular, feminist studies, such as *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Belenky et al., provide us with a way of understanding the complexities of these students' psychological development. In essence, Belenky et al. reveal an intricate configuration of knowledge-producing mechanisms or processes which operate simultaneously to help students learn for themselves and for the approval of the formal educational system in which they participate.

Belenky et al., working from the Kohlberg, Perry, and Gilligan foundation, identify five ways of knowing that are characteristic of women from high school students through college seniors and of varied educational and class background.

They are careful to note that these five categories are not necessarily, as they say, "Fixed, exhaustive, or universal" and that similar categories may be found in men's thinking (p. 15). The research that I am discussing strongly suggests that the latter is indeed true and that the men in this study think more like Belenky's women than like William Perry's Harvard males.

None of the students can be described as living in silence. They have been privileged to be able to partake of a richly diverse educational system and their ability to speak, read, and write extensively has created in them the facility to hear and acknowledge many voices, including their own.

Several, however, seem to be Received Knowers, those who believe in the stark existence of truth disseminated by authorities. One woman, for example, wrote in her journal that she didn't like research because she never seemed able to include all the necessary information and a second felt that she usually only "half understood the topics" she found herself writing about. A male expressed a similar belief, stating that "I can't piece together all the information." Another male didn't like research or argumentative essays because his perspective "always seemed to differ from the teacher's"

These responses indicate that the students are operating on the premise that there are right answers which teachers know and test for in their students'' writing, a premise that, I might add, is not altogether incorrect. Faced with this particular professorial persona, a student might very well feel a lack of control, an inability to know enough to write well, to get all the facts, to control the totality of truth. As one student wrote in her journal:

"I believe that you can know...in my life I have to know. What I don't know is a ghost to me. If I don't have the knowledge I don't have the control For me they are directly related. If I know what is going on I can control what is going on. If I don't know, I can't do anything."

For a student who perceives truth, knowledge, and self in this way, writing based on personal experience or the free-flow of thoughts appears much safer. After all, when writing about the self, the writer is the only one who most fully knows the subject. The writer can then move into a relationship of identify with the teacher as authority.

For most of these Received Knowers, truth resides in the teacher, the authority. They did not, however, appear to identify firmly with or to feel awe for these authorities as did Perry's dualistic men or Belenky's received knowers. In fact, when asked whom they believed provided them with the most effective writing instruction, while 73.5% noted either discussion with the professor or professor's comments on their papers, more than one quarter noted someone else, such as a friend, parent, or writing center tutor. This group, while perceiving a set body of knowledge to be purchased with the right intellectual currency, was not altogether complacent about that reality, manifesting an awareness that the self can be a truth maker: 70% said that they preferred creative/personal writing.

The majority of students in this sampling appear to be Subjective Knowers. For this kind of knower, truth is a concrete, but it is subjectified, personal, and intuitive and can be used to negate the outside world. As Belenky explains, it is "Something experienced, not thought out, something felt rather than actually pursued or constructed." Subjectivists often see themselves not as constructors of truth but as "conduits through which truth emerges." They have profound reverence for the inner voice. And it is in personal writing that the students find themselves best able to to give shape and substance to this voice.

Writing that is meaningful to them focuses on themselves, and its purpose is to express the self. In the questionnaire responses, for example, only three students referred in any way to the impact of their writing on readers other than themselves.

For the majority of these students, personal writing manifests their understanding of who they are, how they learn, and what constitutes truth. Their source of knowledge is unmistakably the self, a self that can move freely to create its own version of the universe, having no monitor or evaluator except itself.

Many of these students indicated they they learned best by listening to their own voices or by trusting in an intuitive power shaping them as conduits of knowledge. For

instance, several liked to draft because it allowed them to get their ideas on paper so they could develop them more fully and clearly. Free-writes appealed to many of the for the same reasons. For several, college in general provided them an opportunity to recognize and acknowledge what Belenkey called "the small voice within," the voice of the thinking self, which they often found to be a strange new experience.

They frequently linked the intuitive regard for the voice within to the power of the imagination. Their valuing of their own inner voice, which they can perhaps most readily identify as imagination, may lead them to cite imagination as an important way to learn.

Belenky et al. note that the Subjective Knower also frequently exhibits a distrust of logic, analysis, and sometimes even words themselves. I found this to be true of many of these students, almost equally for men and women. One of the most often cited reasons for preferring creative forms of writing was the fact that they didn't have to use facts from books, and that they didn't like reading and "spitting back" someone else's words. The words that held authority were their own. Reading other's words and basing one's written work on them seem false, sometime even morally wrong, to these students. As one woman wrote in her journal, "I see books as a tool and sometimes even as weapons in arguments"–this she found very disconcerting. Books threaten these students, and consequently, they contend that they have difficulty understanding such texts and frequently express disinterest in them. The words of the other appear to become credible, understandable, interesting, only when they reflect the knowledge that has already been synthesized into the student's sense of self.

Interestingly enough, these student responses suggest that they acknowledge the world of the other, the "objective" world of texts. Quite a few stated that they liked to make up facts Facts then assume a position of importance in their world, but this position and the facts that occupy it are contingent upon the self as sole creator. The facts must come from the voice of the self–not the voice of the other.

It is this understanding of self, voice, and knowledge that can lead a student to state, "I enjoy writing that concerns me and topics I enjoy–when I get to explore a new idea. Writing about speakers or lectures seems to be a redundancy. Writing should be exploration–not redundancy."

It is for this reason that the standard research paper assignment by far received the most "thumbs down." Repeatedly, students referred to the dullness of the topics and the research process itself, its apparent lack of purpose, the inflexibility of the research essay format, their inability to get themselves into it and to learn anything from it. Some admitted that research was less preferable because they had never before researched a subject, and they found it difficult to simultaneously learn about and competently manage research methods, a new library, and a new style of writing. Many more, however, cited lack of personal expression/ creativity/imagination as the major flaw of the research paper. One student remarked in his journal, "as soon as one must or agrees to follow guidelines, creativity and self are lost."

The majority of the students in the sampling preferred what appear to them to have no structure or guidelines: free-writes, journal entries, short stories, and poems. The first two frequently demand few cultural expectations for form except the most democratic principle that the author is free to choose whatever shape best suits his or her thoughts. In these forms, students are released by authorities from those very constructions most highly valued and prescribed by the authorities–standardized punctuation, spelling, syntax, paragraphing, etc. Thus, students come to know that these genres are better suited to the particular flow and content of their thoughts. The free-write and journal are also the least often evaluated according to conventional grading schemes, such as a grade of A to F. As a result, these forms appear to be safer contexts for the expression of what a student may really think or feel.

The genres of short stories and poems present a more complex phenomenon and, in reality, are deceptive for students and teachers alike. For a number of reasons,

rooted primarily in cultural understandings of art, fiction and poems appear to many students to be highly unstructured, to provide more flexibility for individual structural choices, and to allow for the free expression of the imagination. Students often noted in the questionnaire responses and journal that they felt more relaxed when writing these kinds of texts, more engaged in the writing process and the ideas they were exploring.

These responses should not be unexpected considering the pervasive romantic character of our culture and the perception that art is the purest form of self-expression, that evaluation is purely a matter of personal taste (the good is ultimately relative), and that its creation relies purely on inspiration rather than on craft or technique or process. It is perceived as a form appropriate for children or "gifted" young adults, or adults who have identified themselves as artists. Thus we see the short story or poem taught in elementary school and then gradually abandoned when the student reaches middle school to be legitimized again at the undergraduate or graduate level in "creative writing" programs. By the time a student enters high school, the objective academic essay or the 5-paragraph theme has assumed the position of dominance, and the entering college student is expected to be able to produce this form on demand.

Teachers also tend to refrain from intense evaluation of these kinds of texts, except, of course, in creative writing classrooms or workshops, in contrast to the way we mark, criticize, and prescribe for a more objective text. This particular approach led a talented senior writing student of mine to comment in class one day that she felt more protective of words she'd used to create a short story than of words she'd used in an argumentative essay. For her, the latter didn't , as she put it, "even appear to be real words–just somebody else's marks on a paper with no connection to my real feelings and beliefs".

I am certainly not arguing here that the short story or the poem are inappropriate for self-expression. I am, however, concerned about a particularly simplistic understanding of art that ignores both a certain formalism that characterizes art in all

cultures and the sources of material with which a writer creates a story or poem. For example, when our students write short stories they frequently apply the stylistic conventions of that form. We see in their work exposition, introduction of a conflict or problem, and climax, followed by denouement. Description and dialogue will dominate, and generally, past tense will be used for the narrative voice, which will be either first-person or third-person omniscient. When they write poems, they rely on rhyme, repetition of syntactic structures, or the calculated breaking of lines.

No matter how unstructured students may believe these forms to be, they are highly structured. The students have, over the course of their lives, synthesized these structures so they can now apply them with relative ease and almost without consciousness since these are they forms that they have internalized since earliest childhood through storybooks, television, movies, and music. They may argue, too, that they are "making up" the "facts" for these texts and that they do not rely on external sources of information. In reality, however, their imaginations serve as a cauldron into which real-life (external as well as internal) experiences are funnelled, stirred, and then reconstituted as texts. Their stories and poems, like those of the writers they read and admire--be it a Hunter Thompson, Emily Dickinson, Kurt Vonnegut, or P.D. James--are grounded in their real-life experiences.

The understanding of fiction and poetry writing which many students bring with them to college lacks an awareness of how artists learn, what constitutes knowledge for an artist, the artistic traditions within which people create, the relationships between a writer and his/her audience, and the creative/personal nature of many forms of writing other than fiction and poetry. The last point, in particular, is foreign to many of our students, and it is an understanding of writing perpetuated not only by teachers of writing but also by the textbook publishing industry. A promotional flyer for a a text on how to write fiction and poetry that I recently received reflects the way these genres are generally presented to both students and teachers. The flyer read: "As a writing

instructor, you know that writing is a very personal activity. With [our text], your students will learn to think and feel as writers, to tap the hidden inner creative resources, and to learn and cherish his other own independent way."

Although rhetoric and composition studies have developed a healthy understanding of the creative/personal quality of all writing, the implication of this publisher's blurb is chillingly clear. Those who cherish their independence and their inner voice will write fiction and poetry. Other genres are an anathema to the self.

Another reason why these students may prefer the writing of fiction and poetry relates to the fact that writing has served only minimally, at best, as a mechanism of multi-dimensional communication for them. They perceive that the non-fiction writing that they do, for the most part, functions to communicate but one thing: their ability to learn what the instructor wants them to learn. For example, when the students were asked what kinds of writing they were doing in all of their courses that semester, 78% said they were writing formal expository essays and 44% were writing essay tests. The next highest category was journals at 28% nNo other genres were above 20%.

Students , then, seem to have limited opportunity to utilize their nonfiction writing as a creative medium for affecting others and themselves. Thus, the writing that seems most purposeful and meaningful is the "creative" writing through which they most clearly express what they want to express.

What the students in this research sampling are reacting against is a form of knowing that requires them to place more emphasis on objects (human or nonhuman) in their world than on themselves. Belenkey et all call this Procedural Knowing, identifying two forms of it: separate and connected. Separate knowing is an epistemology based upon impersonal procedures for establishing truth; it emphasizes learning techniques to meet standards of an impersonal authority–what we generally call critical thinking. Belenkey distinguishes this form of knowing from and yet relates it to Subjectivist Knowing. Her work implies that these ways of knowing are mutually exclusive. The

students responses in this sampling, however, lead me to posit that subjectivist and procedural knowing work hand-in-hand. for college age students. Their responses to the questionnaires and in the journals suggest that, overall, they understand the reality of separate knowing, the voice of reason that doubts and questions each proposition it encounters, those different disciplinary techniques for looking at an object and thus knowing it. Of course, they are novices, just beginning to strengthen their powers of reason. But many, as their success in high school and college indicate, know how to write reasonably for that impersonal, invisible reader commonly described as "intelligent but uninformed." Some students are able to use this kind of knowing while simultaneously believing that the best writing reveals truth through self-generation of knowledge.

As an example, I'll use two journal entries written by a student I'll call Matt. In one entry, Matt declared that "the imposition of structure destroys creativity." In another entry, he elaborated on the principle of "knifemanship," which he applied to the world in order to know it. He wrote, " "You never really know what other people think or feel...On the other hand, with objects and machines, you can know everything. You just take it apart with a knife until you see and understand it...We see that no matter how much you cut up people, you still never really know. He who has the best knifemanship is the person who can cut someone up and get closer to knowing than anyone else...You must cut everything up to be in a form you like and understand."

What we see in his text is a confusion/fusion of Subjectivist and Separate Knowing. One one hand, he profoundly doubts our ability to know other human beings, but he wants to believe in a mechanism for knowing. He wants to use reason, the isolation and identification of the parts constituting the whole, to his own ends. But his explanation of self-driven knifemanship is actually more objective and focused on the other–to know something, you have to take it apart and see it as it is, not as how you want it to be.

Matt's entry may give voice to what many of our students think about reasoning and writing. While they learn to think and to write critically, and may even come to enjoy it, they still hold tight to the self as the center of truth and find little meaning or power in the act of reasoning.

Separate knowing, then, is too impersonal for these students. The academic procedures for making meaning appear to ignore their feelings and beliefs. The language and forms they are encouraged to use are too public, for them, too generic.

My research thus far suggests that this particular student population might find itself more amenable to Connected Knowing, which, as Belenkey explains, is still focused on procedure but emphasizes care—a meaningful relationship between subject and object, an opening up to receive the experiences of the object, and an awareness of the importance of the self to the object.

Data from this study furnished evidence of only one clearly identifiable case of Connected Knowing, that of a female I'll call Carol. Carol, while exhibiting the Subjectivist's belief in intuitive moments of knowing, also developed and manifested simultaneously a connected method of discovering what the other is all about. In one of her final journal entries, she wrote, "I have put myself into a character's situation and related it to my life. I have found that you can relate yourself to almost any character in almost any book dealing with almost any problem....it is really fascinating." Although Carol was the only student able to articulate this procedure for learning and knowing, my suspicion is that she is not in the minority. The students' marked preference for personal writing, especially their distinct need to "get into" a subject and to be able to understand immediately based on prior knowledge acquired through personal experience, suggests that they might readily and with much less protest gravitate toward this way of knowing if encouraged to do so by the academic communities in which they live. As a consequence, their passage to Constructed Knowledge—the perspective which integrates thinking and feeling, self and other, acknowledging that "knowledge is

constructed and that the knower is an intimate part of the known"--might be much smoother and quicker--certainly a more pleasurable collaborative experience for both student and teacher.

What Our Students Like To Write–Speculations on Their Genre Choices

Method: The following data were collected from first-year students in the classes of 1992 and 1993. The combined classes totalled 1000 students. Writing questionnaires were distributed to 244 students in 11 sections of First-Year Seminar (an interdisciplinary writing course required of all first-years) and 4 sections of English 101 (a required composition course for 25% of each first-year class based on a writing proficiency essay test). Survey questions relevant to this study were open-ended: "What kinds of writing do you like and why?" "What kinds of writing do you dislike and why?"

Journals were also collected from 30 students in two sections of the First-Year Seminar. Students had been asked to write journal entries on the following topics: "How we know what we know"; "What and How I've learned over this first semester in college."

Data on Student Sample Population:

Sex: Male–136–55.7%; Female–108–44.3% (M to F ration for the two combined classes: 54:46)

English native: Yes–232–95.1%; No–19–7.8%

Average SATV–520; SATM 530

Average ACT–25

High School: Public–178–73%; Private–63–26%; Parochial–3–1%

A. Student Identification of Examples of "Creative" Writing

1. Personal
2. Fiction
3. Poetry
4. Stories/Short Stories
5. Essays (Expository)
6. Personal Letters
7. Humor
8. Description Essays
9. Journals
10. Free-writes
11. Literary Exegesis
12. Opinion Essays
13. Fantasy
14. Journalism
15. Argumentative

Student Identification of Examples of "Non-Creative " Writing

I. Factual Essays
2. Reports
3. Research Projects
4. Argumentative Essays
5. Essays (Expository)

6. Summaries
7. Objective Essays
8. Book Reports/Reviews
9. Term Papers
10. Scientific Reports
11. Institutional Data Collection
12. Analytical Writing
13. Essay Tests
14. Demographic Essays

B. "Creative"-"Non-Creative" Preference

Like "Creative"–330–60%
Like "Non-Creative"–56–10%
Dislike "Creative"–35–6%
Dislike "Non-Creative"–134–24%

C. Preference According to Genre

Genre*	% Dislike	% Like
Research	31%	7%
Essay	27%	28%
Fiction	3%	26%
Poetry	4%	8%
Free-Writes	4%	27%
Journals	2%	10%

The categories identified in A have been compressed into these major groups.

D. Summary of Student Explanation–Like "Creative"

1. It allows my imagination to work.
2. It's non-structured.
3. It's based on personal experience–I know what I'm writing about.
4. It allows me to express my opinions–the ideas come from inside me.
5. It meets only my expectations–no one else's–there's no right or wrong.
6. It's on topics that I like, am interested in, and can understand.
7. I can make up the facts–I don't need evidence from books.
8. It helps me sort through my emotions and feelings.
9. It deals with emotions, not facts.
10. I do it well.

Summary of Student Explanation–Don't Like "Non-Creative"

1. It doesn't allow me to express my own opinion.
2. It's unoriginal–not challenging or thought provoking.
3. It's too structured.
4. It doesn't relate to me.
5. I don't like or understand the topics; therefore, I'm not interested.
6. There is no purpose in summarizing someone else's ideas or words–I don't learn from it.
7. It requires finding evidence from books.
8. It forces me to meet someone else's (the teacher's) expectations (grades).
9. It's too difficult to organize–I can't get all the information, don't know how to take information from books and put it on paper.
10. I'm too shallow to develop the topic.
11. I do it well.

Summary of Student Explanation–Don't Like "Creative"

1. I don't like to express my opinion.
2. Difficult to know what to write–"I am not sure what I am yet, so I can't really say [on paper] that this is what I am or not."

Summary of Student Explanation–Like "Non-Creative"

1. It provides opportunity to say what I think and support it in organized way.
2. It accurately reflects my mind.
3. It allows me to present and reflect on ideas.
4. It allows easy self-expression.
5. It allows me to react to something and learn in-depth.
6. It allows me to take other things and include them in my writing.
7. I do it well.

Ways of Knowing

1. Silent Knowledge–a position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority.
2. Received Knowledge–a position in which women conceive of themselves as capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from the all-knowing external authorities but not capable of creating knowledge on their own.
3. Subjective Knowledge–a position from which truth and knowledge are conceived of as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited.
4. Procedural Knowledge–women are invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge; includes separate and connected knowing.
5. Constructed Knowledge–women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing.

(*Women's Way of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* Belenky et al... New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986.)